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**OBSERVATIONS**  
  
**ON**  
  
**RELIGIOUS DISSENT.**

—◆—  
  
**BY**  
  
**RENN DICKSON HAMPDEN, D.D.**  
**PRINCIPAL OF ST. MARY HALL,**  
**PROFESSOR OF MORAL PHILOSOPHY IN THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD,**  
**AND LATE FELLOW OF ORIEL COLLEGE.**

—◆—  
  
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AT a time when the state of parties and professions among Christians is attracting extraordinary attention, it appears peculiarly necessary, to inquire into the nature of those differences by which we are separated into distinct communions. Shall we be ever "rending piecemeal the coat of Christ without seam"—excluding and condemning each other in the name of Christ—and not pause to reflect, whence this strife originates, and how far we are justified in our mutual exclusiveness by that revelation which we all hold in common?

It has been well observed by an ancient Father, "that he would become the wisest Christian, who had carefully examined into the sects of Jewish and Christian profession." But to act on the spirit of this remark, it is evidently necessary, not only that we should study the origin of sects historically, but that we should search into the principle itself of dissent—the root of that various profession which the Christian world exhibits.

In the prosecution of such an inquiry, the natural course of proceeding is, to review the bearing which conclusions or inferences of doctrine from the text of Scripture, have on the development of religious truth. This point does not appear to

have been attended to at all hitherto in any discussions of the subject of Christian dissent. And yet the principle here referred to, clearly involves in it the whole question of our separation into parties or distinct communions; and according to the determination of it, our treatment of communions differing from ourselves must essentially depend. For what is dissent in Religion, but difference of opinions arising out of the different conclusions drawn by different minds out of the same given elements of Scripture? The great question between discordant sects is, as to the proper reasonings to be drawn from the text of Scripture; each party contending for its own interpretation as the truth revealed. Surely then it ought to be a preliminary matter of consideration by all parties, whether such conclusions from Scripture—such constructions of texts—have in themselves, independently of their relative evidence in comparison with one another, any proper authentic validity as revealed religious truths. This is an inquiry not to be peremptorily dismissed, or to be assumed as already settled by the practice of Christians. In the Roman Catholic Church indeed, the question is formally decided in the affirmative, by the authority assigned to Tradition in conjunction with Scripture: for Tradition is nothing more than expositions of the text of Scripture, reasoned out by the Church and embodied in a code of doctrine. It remains however open to Protestants, to examine the principle itself from which Tradition has taken its rise. It is not enough that we disclaim it in the re-

sult to which it has led Roman Catholics. It is necessary that we should retrace our steps to the point of departure from Scripture, and freely examine whether the first step has been legitimately taken. It will appear, I think, that all who acknowledge the divine authority of Scripture are much more unanimous in reality than they profess themselves to be, in what they fundamentally believe; that they differ, in fact, more in what is matter of human opinion and speculation than in their acceptance of divine truth.

I request therefore a calm attention to the following observations, which I offer in a sincere conviction of their truth and importance; and which, if regarded in the same light by others, would, I feel confident, tend to abate the feverish excitement now very generally felt on questions arising out of the existence of religious dissent. If it should appear, that men in reality differ less in religious belief and conduct, than their formularies of doctrine would lead us to suppose—that it is chiefly the introduction of human opinion into the matter of Revelation that occasions a difference of professions—then is there great cause of alienation and asperity removed; and we may come to the discussion of questions connected with dissent, with the indulgence due to erring judgments. For if all opinion, as such, is involuntary in its nature, it is only a fallacy, to invest dissent in religion with the awe of the objects about which it is conversant. The awe of the sacred objects indeed im-

poses a fearful responsibility on every one in forming his own opinions; but it is no reason that others should depart from those principles by which they would judge him in other subjects. They may guard against his supposed errors with more caution and accuracy, on account of their importance; but they must not wield against him the terrors of the invisible world.

Let me then state the case as it is between the several communions of professing Christians; how far we all agree, and where our differences commence.

In the first place, what is it that we, who are members of the Church of England, are so zealous to maintain? We shall readily answer; It is the pure truth of God as revealed in the Scriptures. Our "hearts' desire" is, that not only ourselves, but every son of Adam may be "saved,"—may be "made "wise unto salvation." If again we inquire of those of other communions, what is the burthen of their profession, shall we not receive the like answer? Candour and charity at least must make us think so of others, however alien from our own communion. Let it be assumed, then, that all who take on themselves the sacred name of Christ, have the cause of Christ at heart equally—that all are equally disposed to maintain the truth as it is in Christ—that all, making due allowance for human infirmity and sinfulness, may be truly said to "love the Lord "Jesus Christ in sincerity."

What then is the origin of all that variety of re-

religious profession with which the world is distracted? Now in the general and vague way, it is easy to answer to this inquiry, that the passions of men, the wayward inclinations of human nature, occasion all this distraction. If believers were now like that little flock, when all were of one heart and one mind, there would be but one communion. But now that the visible Church has embraced a vast portion of the world, the corruption of the mass has infected the leaven put into it, and the sounds of harmony are turned into discord. We must go, however, beyond this superficial view of the case. This is the truth, but it is not the whole truth. The world, as it is, has presented an arena for the conflict—it has not supplied the nerves and the weapons with which the conflict has been carried on.

The real causes of separation are to be found in that confusion of theological and moral truth with religion, which is evidenced in the profession of different sects. Opinions on religious matters are regarded as identical with the objects of faith; and all the zeal which belongs to dissentients in the latter, is transferred to the guiltless differences of fallible judgments. Whilst we agree in the canon of Scripture—in the very words for the most part, if not without exception, from which we learn what are the objects of faith—we suffer disunion to spread among us, through the various interpretations suggested by our own views and reasonings on the admitted facts of Scripture. We introduce theories of the Divine being and attributes—theories of human

nature and of the universe—principles drawn from the various branches of human philosophy—into the body itself of revealed wisdom. And we then proceed to contend for these unrevealed representations of the wisdom of God, as if it were that very wisdom as it stands forth confessed in his own living oracles. “The wisdom that is from above” is at once “pure” and “gentle.” Surely it has no resemblance to that dogmatical and sententious wisdom which theological controversy has created.

But, it will be said ; ‘are no conclusions from the sacred records to be drawn by human reason ? And what then becomes of that rule of theological interpretation, that nothing is to be received as an article of the faith, but what may be “read” in Scripture, or “may be proved thereby ?” The latter part of this rule, it will be urged, is thus rendered a dead letter. If nothing can be argued from Scripture, and by argument established as a truth of revelation, why is any thing referred to as capable of *proof* from Scripture ? All articles of religion are thus cut off, and we are reduced to the simple expedient of expressing divine truth in divine words.’

I shall meet this objection in the first instance, and then proceed to establish the principle for which I contend—namely, that no conclusions of human reasoning, however correctly deduced, however logically sound, are properly religious truths—are such as strictly and necessarily belong to the scheme of human salvation through Christ. If I can establish this point, it will be seen, in the consequences to be

drawn from it, and from its just limitations, how far a conscientious and zealous earnestness for "the faith once delivered to the saints" justifies our sectarian animosities and our party exclusions. At least, by shewing what are not the Christian grounds of exclusiveness, we shall be enabled to take a more dispassionate view of the principles of expediency, which alone justify the separation of Christians into distinct communions.

Now if we consider the true meaning of the theological maxim referred to, it will be found at bottom coincident with the view which I take of religious truth. Its spirit is to guard the depository of sacred doctrine, the Scripture itself, against the inroads of *tradition*, or any human authority. It is no decision on the question, whether reasoning is to be employed or not in the establishment of doctrine. It merely directs us to go to Scripture for every matter of religious debate. If the alleged point cannot be proved out of Scripture, it is no truth of revelation. It by no means however follows, that what can be proved out of Scripture must *therefore* be truth of revelation. To assert this would be to give an opening to every ingenious arguer—every skilful commentator or expositor—to pass off his own conclusions for the dictates of Scripture.

'But a truth of Scripture,' it will be further urged, 'cannot be stated otherwise than in the form of a *conclusion* from scripture. Passages are to be examined, texts to be collated, and the result is to be summed up in some comprehensive expression. Or,

commencing by an inverse process, a particular doctrine is to be taken, and the evidence of it collected from a number of passages, in short, from the whole tenour of Scripture. Here then, it will be said, is clearly an argumentative process of reason. Take, for instance, the truth of our Lord's divinity. How do we know that to be a revealed truth, it may be said, unless by a process of accurate reasoning—from comparison of all the passages in which our Lord is mentioned or alluded to ; and from seeing the truth result from this careful induction and examination? If this method be precluded to the theologian, he must confine himself, it will be added, to the mere statement of scriptural expressions.'

Now I by no means admit this last alternative. It has, I believe, been maintained by some persons. Dr. Hey, indeed, in his admirable Divinity Lectures, goes far towards maintaining its propriety. But when we come to consider the case more closely, it appears to be only a modification of the former method. For the collection itself of scriptural expressions into one body of statement, amounts to a human exposition of the doctrine. An artificial construction is given to them, which they have not in the Scripture itself ;—just as the various collocation of the words in the same sentence, a different punctuation, or a change of emphasis, will give a different complexion of meaning to the sentence. In fact, I think the other method far preferable, as being much more intelligible in its purport. By employing technical language appropriate to the subject, we use

language confessedly inadequate to the truth conveyed, and depending entirely on our conventional use of it for its interpretation ; so that the actual meaning of our statement can always be made to appear : whereas Scripture expressions leave the point which we intend to decide, in the ambiguity belonging to them as parts of a divine communication. Technical language, and human statements of religious truth, have indeed their use and importance ; and in their proper application they are much more serviceable, as employed by us in our authoritative formularies of doctrine, than if they were exclusively scriptural. But I now pass on to shew, that *conclusions* from Scripture are not to be placed on a level with facts revealed to us in Scripture.

I need hardly, I presume, obviate an inference that may be drawn against this position, from the fact that our Lord himself draws a conclusion from a text of the Old Testament, when he argues from the words,—“ I am the God of Abraham, the God of “ Isaac, and the God of Jacob,”—the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead. Here evidently we have a distinct revelation on the subject made by Him—the argument is drawn by “ his illuminating reason<sup>a</sup>,”

<sup>a</sup> Davison’s Discourses on Prophecy, Disc. iv. p. 168. ed. 1824. I cannot write the name of this truly excellent and highly-gifted man, without expressing the deep affection and respect with which I hold his memory, and my sincere grief in the dispensation of Providence which has taken him away, prematurely, not only for his family and all who loved him, but for the Christian Church at large.

and is stamped accordingly with the mark of a divine truth. The same may be said of conclusions drawn by the apostles—we accredit them for divine truths, not as conclusions, but as the dictates of authentic inspiration.

Setting aside such cases, as no evidences against the principle for which I contend, let us now consider the truth itself of the principle. To prevent misapprehension, let me distinctly state what I do not contend for. I do not mean that no conclusions whatever result from the truths of Scripture:—but I confine the assertion to intellectual, or speculative, or theological truth, as distinct from *moral*. Moral arguments there are in abundance from every page and passage of Scripture. Every intimation of the Holy Spirit conveyed by the word of God is, in its strict and proper application, an appeal to the heart of man; and each such appeal is an argument and incitement to duty. Take for instance the truth of the resurrection. Here is, at once, a truth, from which innumerable precepts of duty relating to the whole of the present life, may be deduced. Take again the truth of the sanctification of the Christian by the Holy Ghost. Here also results a whole spiritual code for the regulation and purification of the affections and sentiments. All such inferences fall properly within the province of man. They are enlargements and elevations of those natural outlines of duty, with which God has furnished us in the sentiments of our own hearts, and our experience of the conduct of men in the world. They enter into, and mix themselves

with, our ethical system ;—forming throughout a valuable illustration of the importance of the Christian revelation in regard to human life. If the principle then which I have laid down were understood to apply to such inferences, I should be greatly misunderstood. Nor again have I any thought of excluding mere historical inferences—inferences such as would be drawn from any other authentic documents of history. It is then the intellectual, or speculative, or theological conclusions (by whichever of these names the class may be best signified) to which my objection applies. It is these which have been the fruitful source of controversy and error and heresy in the progress of Christianity, and against which, accordingly, the zeal of every lover of the simple faith, as it is in Christ Jesus, ought to be directed.

It would lead me into too prolix a discussion, unsuitable to the present occasion, fully to establish the grounds on which the futility of an argumentative speculative theology may be displayed. For a more complete discussion of the point, I must refer to my work already before the public—the Bampton Lectures for 1832—in which I have endeavoured throughout to elucidate the nature of this false principle, and pointed out its tendency to corrupt and debase the truth revealed. I shall only briefly touch here on some fundamental characteristics of the Christian Scriptures, which totally preclude all deduction of speculative conclusions concerning religious truth.

Now the real state of the case in regard to our Scriptures is, that the whole revelation contained in them, so far as it is revelation, consists of matter of fact. Either we have direct and continuous history acquainting us with the being, providences, and mercies of God, as the occasions of the world have presented them to our view ;—or we have predictions of his conduct as it would appear on certain future occasions ;—or, as is the case in the didactic and devotional portions, reflections on the Divine agency in the world, and application of the instances of his providences, whether already disclosed or foretold in prophecy, to the awakening of our love and gratitude and adoration. I venture to say, there are no propositions concerning God in Scripture, detached from some event of Divine providence to which they refer, and on which they are founded. Some perhaps will say, ‘ An inspired writer has said ‘ thus, or thus—this then, as asserted by him, is ‘ matter of fact—and, accordingly, it is on matter of ‘ fact in this sense of the expression that the Christian revelation is said to be founded.’ The expression “ matter of fact”—will, no doubt, admit this sense. But to interpret the Scripture revelation in this manner, is only to return to the assertion of its dogmatic character under another form. It brings us back, to take the words or propositions written by the inspired writers as the substance of the revelation, instead of looking to the authenticated dealings of God in the world. When I say, therefore, that the Christian revelation is matter of fact, I intend by

it, to express my conviction that the substance of the revelation is the doings and actions of God ; I have always before my view, some event in the history of God's providences to which I refer it. In this sense the truth concerning God is independent of any peculiar wording of it—its proper divine character is exempted from all alloy which the imperfection of the writer, the peculiarity of his circumstances, the idiom of language, may accidentally infuse into it. In this sense, texts, *as texts*, prove nothing ; texts establish divine truths only as indices to real facts in the history of Divine providence.

Now this twofold character of the Scripture—it being partly historical, partly didactic—serves at once to direct and limit our information concerning God. Whilst we have the mirror of Providence held up to us for our observation, we have also our attention restricted to particular points of view, and the licence of inferring is expressly limited. There is this contrast between our scriptural knowledge, and the knowledge we gain from experience, that God has, as it were, set his seal on the former, whilst he has left the latter to the varied researches of philosophical inquiry. All that is to be inferred from the Scripture notices of him, he has already drawn out for us—in the expositions, reflections, and pious effusions of prophets, evangelists, and apostles.

Let us then attend to the sort of commentaries, or inferences, or reflections, made by the inspired writers on the facts of Divine providence. Are they not exclusively of a practical nature ? Examine the

Epistles of St. Paul, and see whether these energetic documents of an apostle's faith in his Saviour, and love for his converts and brethren, have not been abused,—when they have been treated as doctrinal expositions,—and not as ardent exhortations to Christian duty, from a servant of Christ commissioned to feed his flock, and keep them in the faith once delivered to the saints. The words of St. Paul to Timothy,—“Hold fast the form of sound words,”—have been interpreted, as if the apostle were alluding to some formal exposition of doctrines. But the words of the original by no means amount to this, or countenance such an opinion. They are no more than an exhortation to a maintenance of the faith in Christ. This is the “form” or outline of saving words—of truths full of healing to the soul—to which St. Paul clearly alludes. In fact, there is no other great doctrine preached by him, but what himself declares, when he says, “We preach Christ crucified.” It is the collection of facts involved in that general expression, “Christ crucified,” which is the sum and substance of his writings. The rest is enforcement of this on the minds and hearts, first of the persons immediately addressed, and subsequently of the whole Christian world. I can do little more here than point this out for examination. Let it at least be regarded, for a while, as open to deliberation, whether a belief that a certain portion of Scripture is doctrinal, and another portion practical, may not be an unfounded prejudice.

If this be the case, if we have no other informa-

tion of divine things but in the facts recorded in Scripture, a very important principle results for the regulation of our reason in all matters of religion. And it is no other than what I have undertaken to establish; namely, that no speculative deductions from the language of Scripture carry with them the force of divine truth. Pious opinions indeed we may form: it is hardly possible practically to avoid exercising the mind in reasoning and speculating on the given truths of Scripture. But pious opinions, it must be observed, are not parts of revelation: they may be maintained by probable arguments; but they must not pass current for the genuine mintage of Scripture, or challenge the zeal and devotion of the martyr to divine truth.

And how does this principle result? From the same reason, I answer, that holds good in natural science. No one would approve the philosopher, who should draw conclusions concerning the course of nature, from the terms in which the facts of his science are expressed. Neither therefore should one admit the scriptural observer of God's providences, to raise a superstructure of Divine truth on those terms, which the Holy Spirit has employed in describing and representing them to us. Much might be said respecting the nature of those terms—that they are analogies borrowed from other subjects, and only secondary, imperfect conveyances of the revealed truths. But I wish to rest the case here on still broader grounds. I would maintain, that mere descriptions of facts have no proper, independent

meaning in their several parts, or the terms of which they are made up. Their significancy is in their combination as a whole, as a description or outline of a fact: and it is mere refinement, a mere drawing out of threads spun by our own intellect, when we attempt to make inferences from them as to the nature of things supposed to be implied in them.

‘ But, it will be said, the philosopher surely reasons from his facts. What are his generalizations, but conclusions drawn from his experience? Experience is all that the Author of nature lays before him—his science is the deduction from that experience. Why is not the student of the revealed works of God to do the same? Scripture is before him, as nature is before the philosopher. Scriptural truth then may be the theological conclusions which he draws from Scripture, as the philosopher’s science is his conclusions from experience.’

Let us then revert to the fundamental difference between our natural and revealed knowledge. It is this, that in the former—in collecting the truth from the observations on the natural world—our business is to search, and explore, and hunt out *what is the fact*:—this is the preliminary difficulty before us,—a difficulty by no means insuperable, but precisely such as to demand all our powers of observation, reflection, comparison, judgment, in cooperation with the moral energies of candour, love of truth, diligence, and ardour, in its pursuit. But in learning the truth of God from Scripture, we have the facts

laid before us : they are entirely out of the reach of our investigation, and are, at once, by the word of the Spirit, mercifully stated to us in forms of expression calculated to impress them on our hearts, and enforce them on our belief and conduct. For instance, the great fact, that God sent his Son Jesus Christ into the world, that the world by Him should be saved,—what powers of investigation, however clear-sighted, or however lofty, could ever have discovered? Reason may surmise the truth, so far as it is included and veiled in a general law of Divine providence, expressed under the term Mediation or Atonement, of which it is a transcendent instance. But this is not to reach the fact itself ; which surely none but one who had the witness of the Spirit could declare. The necessity then of the case clearly requires that the facts of which our scriptural information consists, should be fully made known to us, so far as it is necessary for us to *know* them, by the page itself of Scripture. This evidently is that blessing of Christianity to the poor, and the humble, and the infant disciple, conveyed in the saying, that it is a knowledge “revealed unto babes.” It appeals to no philosophical powers for the estimate of its simple facts : nothing is required but that these facts be clearly and correctly stated : and there is no other difficulty in the way of understanding them, but the obstruction of the proud and licentious heart.

From the above observations, we may perceive a necessary distinction (which however has been

strangely lost sight of in practice) between religion and theological opinion. Religion consists of those truths which are simply contained in divine revelation, with the affections, dispositions, and actions, suggested by them. Theological opinion is the various result of the necessary action of our minds on the great truths made known to us by the divine word. I say *necessary* action of our minds, because, as I have already observed, it seems *practically* impossible to check the tendency of the mind to speculate on such subjects, however *theoretically* unsound such speculation, as I have endeavoured to shew, must be.

But the distinction has been lost sight of in practice. In religion, properly so called, few Christians, if any, really differ. All acknowledge, with nearly unanimous assent, I believe, the great fundamental facts of the Bible. They may not be conscious perhaps that they do so far agree: and the reason of this is clear; namely, that they judge of their religion from their theological opinions, and reflect back on the one simple invariable truth of God, the various lights of some speculative system of doctrines, the mere conclusions of their own reason. I would take the extreme case of the Unitarians. And I would say to them; Why do you take so much pains to convince the world that you are not Christians—that you do not agree with the mass of professing Christians in believing in the same sense, “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all?” Is it not that you identify your re-

ligion with your dogmas—that you transfer the natural partiality of your own minds for certain principles, to the broad outlines of Scripture truth ; and dissent from your brethren in the faith, because they will not assent to your metaphysical conclusions?—For when I look at the reception by the Unitarians, both of the Old and New Testament, I cannot, for my part, strongly as I dislike their theology, deny to those, who acknowledge this basis of divine facts, the name of Christians. Who indeed is justified in denying the title to any one who professes to love Christ in sincerity? Much more must we deny it to those who, confessing him in word, deny him in works. I do not forget that passages of Scripture have been retrenched, or explained away, by Unitarians. But is not this very proceeding an illustration of the mode of interpreting religion by speculative dogmas and conclusions? Not only is the religious fact, but the books themselves which are the vehicle of it, made to bend and take a colouring from theological opinion. I allude to the case of the Unitarian more particularly, because, in the ordinary view, he is regarded as more liberal—as less exclusive—in his creed, than members of other Christian communions. And I wish it to be considered, whether he is not, on the other hand, as dogmatic as any other religionist; perhaps the most so of all, so far as he insists beyond all others, on applying a positive sense to passages and expressions, which revelation has left in the darkness of the clouds that surround the Divine

Presence. Putting him, however, on the same footing precisely of earnest religious zeal and love for the Lord Jesus Christ, on which I should place any other Christian, I propose to him impartially to weigh with himself, whether it is not *theological* dogmatism, and exclusiveness, and not religious belief properly so called, which constitute the principle of his dissent.

But I am not intending to condemn him more than other Christians on this ground; I select his case, by way of illustration, as an extreme one. The principle itself is the common fault of us all. In all communions it works its mischief. And without accusing individuals, I propose only to accuse the principle itself—the confusion of theological conclusions and opinions with religion—with a view to its practical correction by us all. To exclude theological opinion from religious profession—to endeavour to sweep away the accumulation of ages,—would be but the vain attempt suddenly to change the whole face of the world. Our next best alternative is, to modify it—to correct its improper application—and so to obviate its mischievous effects.

Assuming then that there must be, or rather *will be*, when we look to the nature of man and past experience, some expression of theological opinions in connection with religious profession,—what, shall we say, is the rule by which that expression is to be guided? The general rule is plain from the previous discussion. The perfection of such expression is when it neutralizes itself—when it meets the una-

voidable necessity of the case in such a way, as to maintain the sole proper authority of Scripture, without arrogating to itself the character of real divine truth. The more it abstains from positive dogmatism therefore, the better it is—the less it consists of definition and explanation, the less of the intrinsic evil of such systems of opinion will adhere to it.

Such is its theoretic perfection. But in applying this rule in fact, other considerations come in to be noticed. Wherever there is opinion, there must be diversity of opinion. In all subjects this is true. It holds in a still greater degree in religion, in proportion to the mysteriousness and importance of the subject. And what is still more to be regarded, differences here are often irreconcilable; because what one holds true, another perhaps will esteem profane; and the words *orthodox* and *heretical* soon come to be used, not to denote merely correct or mistaken judgment, true or false opinion, but the pious and the impious, the religious and irreligious, those in a state of salvation, and those in a state of danger.

If this proceeding were carried to its full length, there would be as many professions of theological opinion, as there are thinking and reasoning persons. But the social instinct of human nature puts a barrier to this indefinite extension of the liberty of reason. Hence the existence of separate communions; an alternative, which accommodates itself to the necessary, irreconcilable differences

of theological opinion, whilst it imposes a reasonable check on the anti-social tendency of private speculation and judgment.

But the existence of separate communions immediately introduces a modification of the general rule above stated. I suppose the differences which separate them to be held important; otherwise the separation would not be justified. Each communion, therefore, must guard against the supposed errors of others, with scrupulousness and frankness of avowal. Whilst it excludes, therefore, according to the general rule, all mere opinions from the throne of Divine truth, it must particularly exclude those which its erring brethren have introduced. Hence its expression of theological opinion will necessarily assume a controversial character. It will deny what the communion regards to be serious errors derogatory to the simplicity of divine truth, and convey that denial in words of strong remonstrance and caution.

From this view it follows that all formularies, comprising the terms of any particular communion, are at once both exclusive and comprehensive. They are exclusive in a twofold sense, by the same declarations—exclusive of all theological speculation,—and exclusive of those particular forms of speculation which other communions have improperly sanctioned. They are comprehensive, because they are not the adequate expressions of individual opinion, but the social approximation and substitute and remedy for that individual expression.

The proper character accordingly of a religious communion is abandoned, when it is not strictly maintained in both these points of view: If it is exclusive in any other sense, but as guarding the depository of divine truth, and as moderating between conflicting opinions, it goes out of its proper province as a communion. Its articles cease then to be the simple laws of a religious society: being divested of their essential relation to other coordinate societies, they become the absolute dicta of the authority which imposes them: and instead of warning against errors of opinions, it denounces, and condemns, as profane, all dissent.

I love and admire the Church of England, because I conceive it to be constituted on the right basis of religious communion;—neither dogmatic in its spirit, though the wording of its formularies may often carry the sound of dogmatism, but, in reality, labouring throughout in its vocation as a faithful keeper of the word of God;—nor intolerant and sectarian in its zeal, but only desirous of uniting as many hearts and voices as possible in one common confession, without exacting a rigid and impossible uniformity of opinion from individual members of the society.

But it will be said by some advocates of our Church, ‘ that to rest the excellence of our communion on these grounds, is to underrate its proper religious character. The doctrines expressed in its formularies, are not mere negations and exclusions of erroneous opinions—they are derived from the con-

‘fessors and doctors of the primitive ages of the Church—they have descended to us in pure stream from the fountains of orthodoxy:—the doctrines therefore must be received and approved as the doctrines of the Church; and we must not invert the case, and approve the Church, as expressing and maintaining its doctrines under a particular form that we may think orthodox and true.’

But is this correct in point of fact? Are the doctrines, *as expressed in our formularies*, (for this is the point at issue, and not whether the divine truths which they are intended to guard, are the same, or not,) precisely those which the primitive Church declared? If we look to the course of controversy, we must see, I think, that the dogmas have taken their mould and complexion from the discussions of successive periods; until they reached a speculative accuracy of expression to which subsequent discussion could not add. Having reached that perfection, there they have rested; and in these ultimate forms, consequently, have since been maintained, out of veneration for antiquity, despair of ulterior improvement, and fear of the consequences of change. But granting that the dogmas of the Church are precisely what they were in the earliest age of Christianity, it is evident, on examination, that a great deal of the false philosophy of former times is involved in the expressions which convey them. And surely this is not any essential part of Christianity. Surely this part at least, if the occasion should serve, may be

rejected from the confession of the Church without the loss of vital truth. Consequently, our doctrinal system as it now stands expressed, cannot be more than a declaration of terms of communion on the part of the Church, subject to revision or alteration, as expediency may suggest—expediency I mean, in regard to the fundamental interests of *Christian truth*; since the very existence of separate communions professing certain theological opinions, is relative to this.

But it will be said further—‘ This is quite latitudinarian. If such are the principles of church attachment, then we are to conceive churches of Christ multiplied according to the diversities of human opinion. All connexion with the Head of the Church is at once dissolved, if separate communions, however dissentient and opposed in doctrine, are to be equally sanctioned as churches. And that all must be considered as equally sanctioned, follows from the principles here laid down.’

The word *latitudinarian* has unfortunately got a bad controversial sense, which makes it formidable, and renders it necessary that I should clear my argument from such an imputation. It sounds to the ear like licentiousness in morals—as if the system to which it is applied, confounded distinctions, as broad as those of right and wrong, virtue and vice. Were it not commonly understood in such a sense as this, I should not be concerned to remove the charge: since though it might speculatively follow from what I have said, that each

communion holding the integrity of Scripture-truth—receiving, that is, as true, all the facts of Divine providence recorded by revelation—may hold itself to be a Christian church; yet it does not follow that I, as a member of the Church of England, should not regard it in a peculiar light, as pre-eminently a church of Christ beyond all others. By virtue of those very theological opinions, to which I have declared my assent in admitting the Articles of the Church of England, I have signified my denial and exclusion of opinions, which I think injurious to Christian truth, and derogatory to the character of a true church of Christ. But because I am exclusively attached to the Church of England, I must not lay down an abstract principle denying the right of others to regard each his own communion in the same light. So far, therefore, let each claim the benefit of the principles here laid down. But it is their immediate application to ourselves, that is the matter in hand—to each communion, for the regulation of itself. If they tend to abate speculation and dogmatism in religion; if they make a way for improvement in the systematic statement of doctrines; if they foster feelings of candour, forbearance, and charity; their alleged latitudinarianism is at least not without excuse—as neither is it, I contend, without its reason.

What however is really meant by *latitudinarian*, as applied to the Christian believer? If I understand it rightly, it means one who seems indifferent about modes of faith—who thinks, for instance, this

or that important doctrine, this or that important question, not so important, as others do who apply to him the epithet; or who is ready, for the sake of peace and union, to conciliate dissentients, further than his allegiance to his own church is conceived to admit. If it were always strictly understood in such a sense, it might be usefully employed to denote a particular class of theological opinions. And in this sense it might be applied by any particular communion to its own members. This however is not the sense evidently in which the term is controversially used. Instead of denoting one who is indifferent to shades of theological opinion, it characterises, in ordinary use, one who is indifferent to religious truths—who loses sight of the one true Church of Christ, and admits human institutions, associations of believers united on some principle or principles of their own choice, to the sacred name of churches—who forgets that there is but one appointed set of ministers to whom authority is given by Christ. And thus, “latitudinarian” is opposed in fact commonly to sound and strict religious principle.

The “unity” of the Church is an expression of great ambiguity; and from the different senses which it admits, great fallacy results in our judgment of what constitutes a true church. Certainly there can be but one true religion. It is but the absurdity of polytheism to speak of more religions than one. This is admitted by all who receive the Scriptures. So far there must be real *unity* among

all professing Christians: there exists among all this one and the same principle—one object of faith—one religion; and *that*, the religion commencing in the Old Testament dispensations, and developed in the New by Jesus Christ. This, then, is the only sense in which unity can strictly belong to the Church. As applied to the individuals composing the Church—to the community of believers,—it must be construed in a secondary, analogical, sense. It may either characterise all claiming the Christian name, as the appellation of *one* nation is given to persons living under the same laws and government,—or the successors, in perpetuity, of the original Christian body; in which case it refers to the one origin, as a nation is one in its descent from one parent stock. In the former case, it stands for agreement or resemblance in certain general characteristics. In the other case, it represents the notion of *continuance*; and is consistent with the greatest differences belonging to successive periods of the Church, so that it may be appropriate, even though there is an entire departure from the profession and discipline of the primitive age. A communion of Christians may indeed hold opinions, that we, or any other communion, may regard as subversive of the one only true religion contained in the Bible. And then, according to our view, that particular communion has theoretically violated the unity of the Church. We cannot consider it as maintaining the one religion,—the one object of faith. In securing the one principle

which constitutes the unity of the Church, we are bound to protest against the supposed errors of others. We object to doctrines and principles which represent Christianity, different from what we conceive to be the Christianity of the Bible. But independently of such an objection, I do not see that we are intitled to exclude any communion, merely as a distinct communion, from the name of the one Church of Christ. No communion, *as such*, can be the one Church of Christ: since the separation into distinct communions is an effect of discordant opinions. And the greatest disagreement of opinions may take place, consequently, without any real violation of the unity of the Church. It is evident indeed that unity, in the secondary sense, may be applied to different communions, both as they belong to the family of Christians, and as they claim to derive themselves from the founders of Christianity. If we object to the last plea, on the ground that their claims are false, this is matter of controversy between us; and we are not to condemn them as out of the pale of the Church, so long as they sincerely profess their assurance, that they are equally heirs of the faith and the authority committed to the primitive disciples.

Throughout indeed our whole treatment of dissenters, a practical distinction is to be observed in our judgment of consequences, according as these consequences follow from a view of our own opinions, in combination with those of other communions,—or from the adverse opinions taken alone. In the for-

mer case, they are valid conclusions *to us*; and our conduct within our own communion must be regulated by them; but the same results do not necessarily follow from their opinions to the members of other communions. They are not necessarily in error or heresy, because we hold them to be so: but viewing their opinions as erroneous, we must guard against them, as feeling that we should ourselves be heretical and profane, if we should change and adopt such opinions.

In reality, the persons professing discordant doctrines may be—I wish to think, are—much better Christians than their profession asserts them: not that they are insincere in their profession of doctrines, but that their differences relate to speculative points; and these are practically neutralized by the religious tendencies of the Christian heart. Let but the great facts of the Gospel find their way to any heart, and one genuine believer of them will not differ greatly from another. Heresy may spring up in the barren and proud heart, and entrench itself within the dogmas of a superficial and arrogant reason; but can never flourish in the soil that feels the culture of the pure word of God. It is no culpable latitudinarianism which includes within the limits of the Church, a dissent that the heart practically disowns. The “heretic” whom Titus was required by St. Paul to reject, was not the mere dissenter, as we now understand that term, but one *apt* to produce heresy or party in the Church, *αἰρετικὸν ἄνθρωπον*, a practical disturber of the Church,

whose perverseness and mischief were evident in his acts.

The real unity of the Church is, after all, an invisible one. It is the communion of saints; the union of Christians with the Holy Spirit himself. And it is not for us to trace his path minutely. The only clue we have to his motions is, by watching his fruits—the “love, joy, gentleness, peace,” which are the scriptural tests of his presence. All that we ought to say of our own profession is, in the spirit of St. Paul’s expression—Such is our “judgment,” and we “think also that” we “have the Spirit of God.”

I recur then to the point from which I set out. Religion is distinct from theological opinion. Our dissensions belong properly to our theological opinions, and not to our religion. The being fully impressed with this view of the subject may dispose the minds of all parties to a practical modification of the evils of dissent. Names, it has been remarked, are the last things that men forego. The observation may be extended to the formularies, or expressions of opinion, by which they are contradistinguished. To expect, therefore, that all sects should formally and ostensibly pull down their barriers of separation, and combine in one common mass under the Christian name, seems hopeless, if we are to judge from what is known of human nature. But may not that gentle and enlightened and spiritual toleration of dissenting opinions, which consists not of a mere allowance of profession, the bare due of every one at our hands, but of a charit-

able religious judgment, that thinketh no evil—that is willing to bid God speed to every one that names the name of Christ in sincerity; may not, I say, such a toleration as this, insensibly work a blessed change in the minds and hearts of those who are now estranged from us? Look to the wisdom of Rome, which combined in one mass the natives of so many different countries and discordant tongues, under the one name of Roman citizens. And let us do that out of charity, which Rome did out of policy. Had the invidious distinction of Roman and no-Roman presented a broad and visible mark of separation, the various parts of the empire would probably have continued for ever dismembered. So if Church and no-Church are to subsist as the perpetual boundaries between the members of one communion and those of another, there is no prospect of any cordial union among the scattered members of Christendom. The happy consummation, when the great Shepherd of the sheep shall come and gather all into one fold, is frustrated and delayed by the passions of men—by their hard judgments and hard speeches.

At the same time, I would leave it to the serious consideration of all, whether they are not apt to confound theological opinion with religion, and strive for the maintenance of the former with a zeal belonging to the latter only. Proverbial truth tells of such a thing as *theological odium*, but there can be no such thing as *religious odium*. And the perceiving that our differences arise from the varieties of human judgment, whilst the word of

God serves only as the occasion of the different opinions by which disputants are divided, must prepare us for the discussion of those differences with a calmness and impartiality essential to the cause of truth. Members of all communions should reflect with themselves, whether they are not unnecessarily dogmatic in their theological opinions ;—those of the Church of England, in excluding and condemning errors which have passed away, or insisting on distinctions and verbal explanations now little understood, and unimportant to the defence of religious truth ;—those of dissenting communions, whether it is not their own dogmatism, more than that of the Church of England, which is the cause of their separation and exclusion. Could all be brought to see that practical conformity in religious feelings and actions is the great object to be pursued, a great step would be made towards a speculative uniformity of opinion. When we recollect too, that the opinions which divide us into different communions, are not really *opinions*<sup>b</sup> as they are held by the mass of each society,—are not their own conclusions deduced by their own reasonings, but

<sup>b</sup> “ But, notwithstanding the great noise is made in the world about errors and opinions, I must do mankind that right, as to say, there are not so many men in errors and wrong opinions, as is commonly supposed. Not that I think they embrace the truth ; but indeed, because concerning those doctrines they keep such a stir about, they have no thought, no opinion at all. &c.” Locke’s Essay on Human Understanding, book iv. ch. 20. sect. 18.

traditionally received on the authority of others, whether by education or mere unthinking deference to certain names or principles,—if all could only be induced to join in one common feeling of divine love, and worship, and service, a real uniformity would result, far beyond that apparent uniformity now existing in our separate parties in themselves. I would not have any one indifferent as to what opinions he professes. I do not see how those who have really examined questions of theology, and have formed deliberate convictions of the error of certain conclusions, can forbear to maintain their convictions, so long as they apprehend danger to the truth from those conclusions. They cannot, ought not, to teach otherwise than according to such convictions. Neither the cause of truth, nor that of religion, can require that any one should abandon convictions of truth, which he holds on grounds of serious deliberation and argument. But then to such a person, *argument* is the proper sphere of his exertion. He must not treat those whom he opposes, as if they were irreligious persons, and no members of the Church of Christ. He must not regard them as less solicitous than himself to maintain the pure Christian truth. He is standing on the debatable ground of *opinion*; and the laws of opinion must therefore be respected. He must not, as I have said before, hurl the weapons of spiritual condemnation, as if he were posted in the strong-hold of religious truth, and his adversary in the depths of impiety. This justice to an adversary is perfectly consistent

with the most resolute maintenance of our own theological opinions.

All attempts, consequently, to secure the support of our particular communion, by identifying it with religion itself, as if to depart from it at all, or modify it, in any way, were to depart from Christianity itself, are fallacious and improper. They proceed on a begging of the question between that communion and its dissentients ; since the question is which is the most correct view of religious truth ; religious truth being presupposed as equally the object of each party. Again, all attempts to carry theological opinions by the numerical weight of its partisans, or their influence in society, or by depression of its antagonists, are unfair : for these are no tests of the truth of opinion. They are improper applications of the zeal for religion to the defence of a peculiar theology.

But to say this, does not imply that we are not justified in educating those intrusted to our care in those views of religious truth that we have adopted. This is strictly within our own province as a distinct communion. We do not then appear in the character of controvertists : the truth of our opinions is then assumed in the very fact of our existence as a distinct communion, and to moot this point here would be to break up the foundation of our society. The education of our youth in the principles of our own communion is but a part of the sincerity of our own profession.

I do not think, therefore, (to apply this observa-

tion to a case which is now agitated), the admission of dissenters from our communion, *as dissenters*, to the bosom of our society here, is required by those principles of enlightened and spiritual toleration which I have suggested. So long as the terms of our communion are what they are, as honest men, we must uphold them and teach them. To accommodate them to different sects would be virtually to abandon them. But I see no objection, at the same time, to the admission of dissenters, *because* they are dissenters. If persons of different communions are willing to come amongst us, and conform to our discipline, and receive instruction from us, knowing that we are members of the Church of England and sincere teachers of its theological system—where can be the real objection in such a case? There is no compromise of principle in this—no merging of peculiar opinions in a vague comprehension of religion—no silencing of what we conceive important differences of doctrine. If there is danger of proselytism to heterodoxy, the danger is more than counterbalanced, by the probability of conformity to ourselves from the ranks of dissent. As we believe ourselves to have the truth on our side, so we must believe the ultimate ascendancy must be to our own views. Is there a fear of controversy? Is there then no controversy now? Is there not room left for debate in our present terms of communion? Is it desirable to check all discussion of opinions in theology, among those who will soon have to encounter it in the conflicts of the world; and particularly at a place where

there are abundant moderators on the side of orthodoxy, whose instructions and discipline must naturally give the tone to opinion in this respect, as in all others? Is there, again, fear of creating indifference to points of religious belief? No less must this evil be dreaded, where subscription to articles is admitted, without requiring an understanding of the several differences of doctrine subscribed.

I do not scruple therefore to avow myself favourable to a removal of all tests, so far as they are employed as securities of orthodoxy among our members at large. Tests are no parts of religious *education*; if they were, I should think we were justified in retaining them: they are merely boundaries of exclusion. It has been asserted by an able and candid writer, Archdeacon Powell<sup>c</sup>, (and since by others,) that subscription to articles is analogous to teaching a child to say the Creed before it can understand it. The instances are not parallel. They are not illustrations of the same principle. By teaching the Creed we commence the *education* of the child. We do not mean to exclude other children; but we simply educate our own in that way, giving him some leading facts of Christianity to be learned. But tests at admission to the University are exclusions, and nothing more. They form no element of education. They are placed in front of the education of the place; but this is quite a different thing, of course, from the beginning itself of the education.

<sup>c</sup> Discourse II. preached at Cambridge in 1757, page 40. Powell's Discourses on Various Subjects, 8vo. London, 1776.

They may be very useful for ascertaining the competence of teachers or official persons in the University, but can be of no service to those who are to be taught. Instruction in the Articles themselves *is* of use ; and that I suppose to continue, even though the tests be removed. Indeed, without any reference to dissenters, it would be well for our own members, if the form of subscribing at matriculation, or on any occasion where no power or right of teaching were concerned, were done away ; as the sense in which it is explained, is not of that direct, unequivocal character, which may at once satisfy all minds and defy cavil and exception. That the tests, as now used, may be defended, I do not deny ; and that, by persons of unquestionable sincerity and honourable feeling ; but I would rather not have occasion to resort to such defences, by retaining a form, at least superfluous so far as our own members are concerned. The act, however, of removing these tests should undoubtedly be the act of the University itself, and not be imposed on it by the legislature. For besides the infraction of corporate rights by such an interference—a point on which the present argument does not admit that I should more than touch—as the legislature is composed of members of different communions, it is not treating us, as members of the Church of England, with that respect to our peculiar opinions which I contend throughout is due to each separate communion. It is to treat us as if we were positively condemned of error, or could lightly abandon barriers which we may

think necessary for the security of religious truth. This is not to construe our measures with the charity and forbearance due from one communion to another. We may be wrong, as I think we are, in retaining our tests as defences of true religion. But let us be convinced of it among ourselves by dispassionate reasoning, by the triumph of charitable and enlightened toleration, such as I have here advocated, over exclusive and unnecessary dogmatism.

I will only add, that it was with such sentiments that I concurred in a late declaration against a bill brought into Parliament, for enabling certain classes of persons to resort to the Universities by removing the tests now in use. The measure should not, I conceive, be enforced on the University by an authority, neither its own, nor in exact unison and sympathy with its own principles. If our system is to be relaxed on any point, the University, as a Church of England institution of education, should be left to the choice of those means which it may deem consistent with the preservation of its Church of England character. The University is, and ever has been, a Church of England institution. It has not varied, (as has been assumed in many of the arguments on the subject,) in its religious profession, according as acts of Parliament have prescribed, or the state of public opinion has changed. It has indeed modified its own profession, but still it has always been a Church of England institution: it was so before the Reformation;—it has continued

so since the Reformation. There is no analogy therefore between its transition from the Roman Catholic faith to Protestantism, and that extension, which some are now advocating, to the various professions of religion existing in the country. In the one case it reformed itself, still subsisting in its original form, as one Church, one communion; whereas in the case proposed, the University must cease to be one communion, and be forcibly distracted into a variety of professions, whilst its own profession remains unchanged. But thinking so, I feel it still more necessary to urge on all parties a calm consideration of the relation in which dogmatic declarations stand to the truth revealed in Scripture. Let those who are not with us, see how far they are justified in requiring a deference on our part to their theological opinions; and let members of our Church search and see whether their sincere zeal for the religion of Christ may not have been, unconsciously to themselves, transferred to the defence of human expositions of doctrine.



